

Fish, Family, Freedom, and Sacred Water: The Salmon Cultures of the Bristol Bay
Watershed, Alaska

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Abstract: In the face of proposed large mine development, in 2010 nine villages in the Nushagak and Kvichak watersheds of Bristol Bay, Alaska asked the United States Environmental Protection Agency to assess the possibility of applying Clean Water Act (Section 404c) protections to the region. (A decision is expected Fall, 2012.) As part of that assessment, the authors were contracted by EPA to conduct a cultural characterization of the importance of salmon and clean water to the indigenous people of the region: the Dena'ina and Yup'ik. This paper summarizes the "voices of the people" obtained from 53 interviews in six villages in 2011 regarding the interconnectedness of wild salmon and clean water in their lives. Results are clear: the people have an unbroken record of wild salmon subsistence from prehistory to now and salmon-influenced patterns continue to permeate the culture linguistically, nutritionally, socially, politically and religiously. The Dena'ina and Yup'ik of the region may be the last remaining salmon cultures in the world still reliant on wild foods with wild salmon the keystone species. Loss of salmon or clean water due to mining or other factors would be culturally and nutritionally devastating.